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REFORMULATION, NOTICING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF L2 ACADEMIC WRITING

INTRODUCTION

The provision of effective and efficient feedback on academic writing is an important part of the role of a teacher of academic writing. It allows the teacher to provide the students with a ‘reader reaction’ and ‘targeted instruction’ (Hyland & Hyland 2006, p. 206), whilst attempting to convey ‘an understanding of the expectations of the communities they are writing for’ (ibid.). My experience, on the English Language Centre’s pre-sessional course at the University of Bath, however, has been that some students, particularly those with a lower level of proficiency in L2 writing, seem to be less than motivated by feedback on their writing in the form of a correction code, and are often unable to correct errors, perhaps because of insufficient grammatical knowledge to do so (Lee, 1997), a lack of understanding of the terminology of the code (ibid.) or maybe because they prefer to deal with errors in discussion with the teacher, rather than

alone. I was keen, therefore, to revisit my feedback methods and to find a way of engaging the students in the learning process whilst being able to transfer implicit knowledge, which is often culturally rich, and which often makes the difference between an L1 and L2 writer. I decided to make use of a model to help them to understand what their writing should resemble if it were to achieve native-like fluency and accuracy in the appropriate academic style.

REFORMULATION OF THE STUDENTS’ TEXTS

As I had been working increasingly with student output as a starting point for input, I decided that the ‘model’ I would use would be a reformulation of their own text – that is, a rewrite by me of what they wanted to say but using my knowledge as an L1 writer to express that content in an appropriate way. In seeing their ideas expressed in this

way, the students have the opportunity to notice features of the target genre, whether grammar, lexis and syntax, or the deeper issues of style and cognition. I had been interested in studies which had used this technique (Levenston, 1978; Cohen 1982, 1983; Allwright et al., 1988; Thornbury, 1997; Swain & Lapkin, 2002; Adams, 2003; Yang & Zhang, 2010), and I wanted to see if the students could see the differences between their original text and my reformulation and, if so, what features they would actually notice. I was also keen to see if these features were then put into use in their subsequent attempts at writing. My few attempts at reformulation had been well received by the students and I believed it had validity in terms of their needs. Alexander et al.'s comment (2008, p. 8), that the focus of the EAP classroom should be 'what the student is trying to do in the future ... rather than what the student can do now', seemed to address the issue of raising awareness of the gap to bridge between their own non-native and the required native-like performance expected for their future undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

NOTICING WITHOUT A DISCUSSION STAGE

Noticing is an essential part of the reformulation technique. It is the ability to see where the native-writer text differs from the original, to see what it is that makes the difference, in order to attempt to transform this into linguistic intake and subsequent use. Noticing has been seen as the 'cornerstone of the whole reformulation strategy' (Allwright et al., 1988, p. 238), and many of the reformulation studies done previously have included some form of discussion stage,

with a native speaker available to guide the student in the noticing phase, which Thornbury (1997, p. 332) refers to as an exercise to ascertain whether 'input and output are matched' or a method to 'highlight mismatches'. Course timetable constraints, however, dictated that there would be no opportunity for a discussion phase, and the aim of this study was to determine whether the students could study both their own and the reformulated texts alone, without guidance, and whether they could notice any 'mismatches' without prompting. If this proved to be the case, it would be a valuable and motivating feedback option, which could empower students in the development of their writing.

ENGAGING THE STUDENTS IN THE PROCESS

As time was short, I planned a small-scale study, to last six weeks, in the third term of the academic year – a time when students are becoming acutely aware of achieving the level of writing required for their future courses. The study group consisted of ten students, two undergraduates and eight postgraduates, who were writing with a degree of fluency that demonstrated an awareness of organisation, yet required broadening in terms of vocabulary, consolidating in terms of grammar and developing in terms of academic style. Seven nationalities and a variety of learning backgrounds were represented within the group. I decided to give the students one writing task every week for six weeks, which I then reformulated and gave back to them. The students responded well to the fact that I had taken the time to rewrite their work and readily agreed to take on the follow-up

'noticing' exercise. The writing tasks were simple essays on subjects familiar to the students, such as family, work and education. After I had reformulated their texts, the 'noticing' tasks took place every week in class, and the students wrote down the differences they were able to see between their own text and mine. I collected and analysed each student's notes throughout the six weeks by categorising items noticed into language areas to see if what they had noticed had influenced their writing. They were not required to redraft their original text at this point. What follows is an example excerpt of one student's writing, week by week, with my reformulation of that writing, and then the student's 'noticing' notes. The complete texts would be too long to include in this paper, but I have included the student's feedback comments for the whole texts, in order to give a broader picture of the language features being noticed by the student overall. Indicators of the student's country, city or nationality have been removed for anonymity purposes.

EXCERPTS FROM THE WEEKLY WRITING, REFORMULATION AND NOTICING PROCESS

Excerpt from the original text by Student [001] – Week 1

During last tow deceit people have been become spent there time on things are not important. Consequently, people have lack in there free time spatially with family. There is several factors lead to lacking human time such as obviously technology.

Reformulated version by the teacher –

Week 1

During the last two decades, time has been increasingly spent on non-essential activities. Consequently, people seem to lack time for their families. Technology has contributed to this.

Noticing notes from the student – Week 1

Obviously my writing has poorly words in other words teacher has good academic words. There are some grammar weakness such as passive – word order. My writing is not direct. Too long.

Excerpt from the original text by Student

[001] – Week 2

The main aim is to write about the role of (...) family which it has affected to the (...) society. First of all the (...) family has range approximately 4 to 9 family members. Consequently, the society has an extended family, that obviously happened in (...) wedding the number of visitors about 600 to 1000 people.

Reformulated version by the teacher –

Week 2

The role of the (...) family has influenced (...) society. The (...) family has typically 4 to 9 members. Consequently, (...) society has extended families, which, at times of weddings, can mean a total of 600 to 1000 guests.

Noticing notes from the student – Week 2

I have to make my sentences more simple. Poor vocabulary. Grammar problem in writing structure.

Excerpt from the original text by Student [001] – Week 3

The aim of this writing is to discuss one of the biggest issues in (...) about unemployment situation. During last few years (...) government has been become increasingly worried about unemployment because the percentage of them rose to more than one million.

Reformulated version by the teacher – Week 3

The unemployment situation is a significant issue in (...) and, in recent years, the (...) has become increasingly concerned about the number of unemployed, which has risen to more than a million.

Noticing notes from the student – Week 3

- Vocabulary – 'biggest' – 'significant', 'urgent' – 'problem', 'Given' – 'award'.
- There are some weakness on writing structure – 'built' – 'construction' 'aimed'.
- Useful linking – 'one of these', 'urgent action', 'Another is the'

Excerpt from the original text by Student [001] – Week 4

During last two decades (...) national education has been developed the education system. This essay will discuss that the advantages and disadvantages of education system in (...).

Reformulated version by the teacher – Week 4

The (...) system has been undergoing development in the last two decades. This essay will discuss its advantages and disadvantages.

Noticing notes from the student – Week 4

- New words – 'undergoing', 'curriculum', 'struggle', 'across different regions'
- I learned to avoided the sentences.

Excerpt from the original text by Student [001] – Week 5

Recently, in (...), it has become an extremely controversial issue that improving the public transport system in the main cities such as (...). Therefore, for purposes of this essay I will confine the discussion to some strengths and weaknesses on the subject of (...) public transport system.

Reformulated version by the teacher – Week 5

Improving the public transport system in the main cities, such as (...) has recently become an extremely controversial issue in (...). Therefore, this essay will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the public transport system in the country.

Noticing notes from the student – Week 5

- New words – 'built along', 'wide avenues', 'private ownership', 'for instance'.
- I did not write conclusion.
- I feel my writing has improved in writing structure and word order.
- There are still some vocabulary weaknesses.

Excerpt from the original text by Student [001] – (final) Week 6

Recently, in many countries around the whole world, it has become an extremely controversial issue that national health organisation has been done a several scientific approaches to improve the healthcare system. However, some countries have significant facilities ...

I relied on my teaching experience to interpret the comments made by the students in order to categorise them into aspects of language. This student noticed vocabulary and structure, both at sentence and text level. On analysis of the student's texts week by week, these features appeared to be reflected in actual performance and the

greatest improvements seemed to be in vocabulary and cohesion, followed by grammatical accuracy and fluency. A brief breakdown of the noticing and actual performance of all the students in the group can be found in Appendix 1, and an overview of this information is represented in Table 1.

Table 1 An overview of the incidence of noticing and actual progress in the students' writing, according to vocabulary range and accuracy, organisation and coherence, and grammatical accuracy and fluency, over the six-week period

| Student | Vocabulary range and accuracy | | Organisation and coherence | | Grammatical accuracy and fluency | |
|---------|-------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|---|----------------------------------|---|
| | N (noticed) | P (progress made) | N | P | N | P |
| 001 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| 002 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |
| 003 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 004 | ✓ | | ✓ | | | |
| 005 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | |
| 006 | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ |
| 007 | ✓ | | ✓ | | | |
| 008 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ | ✓ |
| 009 | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| 010 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | | ✓ |

OBSERVATIONS ON THE PROCESS

Progress in the students' writing was measured by analysing the texts in detail for the number of errors occurring in the language areas identified in Table 1. These areas, along with task achievement, correspond to the English Language Centre's marking criteria. If there was a reduction in the number of errors of this type in the text overall, then progress was seen to be made.

Table 1 shows that two participants – [003] and [005] – showed progress in all areas noticed. Three participants – [001], [002] and [0010] – showed progress in two areas noticed, but also in grammatical accuracy and fluency, which they did not comment on in their noticing feedback. On the other hand, participants [004], [006], [007] and [009] noticed areas of difference but made no apparent progress. These students could have been exercising agency by deciding that they needed other areas of language at this

point in the course, rather than those presented in the reformulated texts (Yang & Zhang, 2010). For example, Student [006] noticed organisation and coherence but made progress in grammatical accuracy and fluency. This student was particularly challenged in grammar and, therefore, could have simply taken in what was required at this stage of acquisition (Johnson 1988, cited by Thornbury, 1997). Student [007] had presented a challenge, being considered somewhat fossilised in his development. Although this student noticed vocabulary, organisation and grammar features, there was no clear evidence of progress in any area. Student [009] had made slow progress in previous terms, attributed partly to a lack of confidence. Of the ten students, four were identified as ‘conscious learners’ (Cohen, 1982, p. 17), namely students [002], [003], [005] and [0010]. These were students who Cohen would have identified as being very aware of language. All four made progress in all areas noticed. Student [001] made similar progress and, although not readily appearing to be a ‘conscious learner’, was a confident communicator.

Overall, therefore, six of the ten participants showed progress in at least two areas noticed. Other reasons for not making progress, despite noticing a feature, might be that the gap is too wide between the student’s ability and the target language; the student concerned might need longer to assimilate the information; the student might be focusing on another area of presumed need; might have become fossilised; or may lack particular confidence in that area. Of added interest in this table, however, is that, out of the six students making progress in grammatical accuracy and fluency, only two actually noticed these features. This might suggest that grammar could be addressed

incidentally through this feedback method. Future research might seek to explore this.

Specific features noticed by all included the length of the native texts, almost always proving to be shorter than the student’s original text, as found by Cohen (1982). It had been a surprise for many of the students that complexity did not necessarily mean lengthy sentences. They had, it seemed, associated advanced writing ability with longer texts. Of significance for me was simply the fact that ‘noticing’ had taken place and writing progress appeared to have been made. The study cannot claim that one is the result of the other, but there seemed to be enough incidence of progress made in areas noticed to perhaps warrant further investigation.

What the current study does show, however, is that, even though the students were asked to ‘notice’ alone, rather than in a discussion phase, the outcomes of the noticing were similar to previous studies, in terms of the type of student it tended to suit, namely ‘conscious learners’ (ibid. p. 17), and the area of language that seemed to benefit most, namely cohesion and coherence (ibid.). This suggests that the discussion phase might be an important enhancer of the process but not the gatekeeper to it. The length of the study and the size of the sample are undoubtedly limitations, and reformulation takes a considerable amount of time and effort on the part of the teacher, but a post-study group discussion with the students revealed that they had enjoyed the exercise, as had I. They would have preferred more time in the ‘noticing’ sessions, but they did believe, overall, that their writing had benefited.

TAKING THE PROCESS FORWARD

I now incorporate reformulation into my feedback methods, and it is greatly appreciated by the students receiving it. I often only reformulate one paragraph or, for lower-level students, a couple of sentences, as it is a time-consuming process and, in whole-text form, can be overwhelming. The students are now familiar with the method and, as a review exercise at certain intervals in the term, I ask students to redraft their own texts, with an attention to both surface features and style. It has re-energised writing classes and seems to have empowered the students, giving them greater autonomy and agency in the learning process. It has provided a positive, rather than a deficit, approach to feedback and allows the students to access and focus on what they believe they need at any given time. In so doing, the teacher is provided with a valuable insight into the nature of those needs.

Several implications for future research have arisen from this study. As ‘conscious learners’ (Cohen, 1982, p. 17) responded well in terms of progress, an investigation into which student profile is best served by the method could be an area of future study. It would also be interesting to investigate whether nationality or other affective variables influence the outcome. Likewise, greater investigation could be conducted into language proficiency and the optimum L2 proficiency level required in order to optimise the benefit of this feedback method. In addition, longitudinal studies could establish whether attitudes towards reformulation change over time as a result of students becoming more proficient at noticing.

CONCLUSION

Finding the optimum feedback strategy is a challenge, and the concepts of reformulation and ‘noticing’ are not new. I have found, however, that students respond well to this form of feedback at certain times in their writing development. The extent and timing of this input depends, in my experience, on the students’ willingness and confidence to engage in the process. Reformulation is student-centred, it is scaffolded (Reid, 1994, cited by Tardy, 2006, p. 62), and it exploits the teacher’s rich store of culturally-informed writing experience, whilst maintaining the identity and value of the students’ content and ideas. Retaining their ownership through the content has been a motivating factor for the students. The blend of student and teacher expertise enables the student voice to emerge and the text to be redrafted to align closer to the target academic community – both key skills in preparation for university study. As they have become aware of the potential of the skill to notice and have been encouraged to work independently to transfer what is ‘explicit’ into ‘implicit knowledge’ (Thornbury, 1997, p. 326), my students have increasingly enjoyed the process. The technique has become a key part of my feedback strategy in the development of L2 academic writing, and, with apparent success without a discussion phase in the noticing, it has become a key part of my students’ move towards learner independence.

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APPENDIX I

Student [001] noticed the following aspects week by week (quotation denotes student's actual words):

(Week 1) Academic words; passive voice; word order; the length of the teacher's text

(Week 2) Sentences need to be more 'simple'; 'poor' vocabulary; grammar for sentence structure

(Week 3) Formal vocabulary; collocation; writing structure; 'useful' linking phrases

(Week 4) New vocabulary; 'learned to avoided the sentences' – learned to be brief?

(Week 5) New vocabulary; collocation; 'didn't write conclusion'; structure and word order improved; 'still some vocabulary weaknesses'

(Week 6) No noticing requested

Student [001]'s greatest 'noticing' was in the areas of vocabulary and structure (sentence and whole text). This seems to be reflected in actual performance over the six weeks, in that the greatest improvements were made in vocabulary and cohesion, followed by grammatical accuracy and fluency.

Student [002] noticed the following aspects week by week (quotation denotes student's actual words):

(Week 1) Nominalisation; useful expressions; academic vocabulary; word order; grammar in general

(Week 2) Word order; structure; lack of formality; connecting sentences; a need to be more concise

(Week 3) Formal vocabulary; collocation; nominalisation

(Week 4) Structure; word order; article 'the'; the need for more academic vocabulary and connectors

(Week 5) article 'the'; appropriate vocabulary; position of adverbs

(Week 6) No noticing requested

Student [002]'s greatest 'noticing' was in the area of vocabulary, followed by structure. The actual performance over the six weeks, indicated cohesion and organisation first, followed by vocabulary. Grammatical accuracy and fluency improved the least.

Student [003] noticed the following aspects week by week (quotation denotes student's actual words):

(Week 1) Position and use of connectors; vocabulary (synonyms); prepositions

(Week 2) Articles; collocation; appropriate vocabulary; nominalisation

(Week 3) Formal vocabulary; collocation; nominalisation; use of relative pronouns

(Week 4) Relative clauses; nominalisation; appropriate vocabulary; articles

(Week 5) Position of 'generally'; conciseness through vocabulary; synonyms; comparison

(Week 6) No noticing requested

Student 003's greatest 'noticing' was in the area of grammar (relative clauses/articles/prepositions), vocabulary (synonyms/more formal) and style (nominalisation). The actual performance over the six weeks, indicated greatest achievement in grammar and fluency, followed by cohesion and organisation. A smaller improvement was made in vocabulary range and accuracy.

Student [004] noticed the following aspects week by week (quotation denotes student's actual words):

(Week 1) Shorter and more effective sentences; appropriate words; new vocabulary

(Week 2) Appropriate words; grammar (sentence structure); detail

(Week 3) Conciseness; new more appropriate vocabulary; grammar (tenses)

(Week 4) Word order; wrong words; more appropriate vocabulary; word order; nominalisation

(Week 5) Appropriate words; sentence order; grammar (tenses); style of reformulated text

(Week 6) No noticing requested

Student [004]'s greatest 'noticing' was in the area of vocabulary and style. However, actual performance indicates no improvement overall in organisation and cohesion, or grammatical accuracy and fluency, and the level of vocabulary range and accuracy actually dropped at times. This might indicate an example of there being too great a gap in level between the student's original text and the teacher's reformulated text for the student to benefit from the exercise.

Student [005] noticed the following aspects week by week (quotation denotes student's actual words):

(Week 1) Sentence; word order; vocabulary; conjunctions; linking; conciseness

(Week 2) Formality; cohesion; tenses

(Week 3) Vocabulary; sentence structure; tense; passive

(Week 4) Vocabulary, pronouns, linking, passive

(Week 5) Noun phrases; sentence structure

(Week 6) No noticing requested

Student [005]'s greatest 'noticing' was in the areas of sentence structure and lexis, which this particular student associated with conciseness. Actual performance indicated an improvement in vocabulary, followed by cohesion. There was no apparent improvement in grammatical accuracy and fluency.

Student [006] noticed the following aspects week by week (quotation denotes student's actual words):

(Week 1) Paragraphing; passive; phrases; linking

(Week 2) Phrases (collocation); sentence structure; word order

(Week 3) Vocabulary range; sentence structure

(Week 4) Word order; vocabulary range

(Week 5) Noun phrases; vocabulary range; collocation

(Week 6) No noticing requested

Student [006]'s greatest 'noticing' was in the area of phrases, vocabulary range and sentence structure. Actual performance showed improvement in grammatical accuracy and fluency, but not in the other areas.

Student [007] noticed the following aspects week by week (quotation denotes student's actual words):

(Week 1) Vocabulary range; passive

(Week 2) Tense; subordinate clauses; vocabulary; word order

(Week 3) Vocabulary; complex sentences; grammar (tense formation)

(Week 4) Conciseness

(Week 5) No data available for noticing

(Week 6) No noticing requested

Student [007]'s greatest 'noticing' was in the area of vocabulary and sentence formation. Actual performance indicated no change throughout the investigation period in all areas of analysis. Interestingly, this student had presented a challenge to the Department long before this current study was conducted, and had appeared to have fossilised, having been with the department for the entire year to date, and showing no real improvement over this period. The student was not available for the noticing session in Week 5, but it was felt that enough information was available to build a picture of what was being noticed and used from the other weeks' work.

Student [008] noticed the following aspects week by week (quotation denotes student's actual words):

(Week 1) Vocabulary range; repetition of nouns

(Week 2) Conciseness; paragraphing; grammar and vocabulary

(Week 3) Grammar; time phrases; vocabulary; conciseness

(Week 4) Introduction; academic style and expression

(Week 5) Conciseness; complexity of sentences; repetition

(Week 6) No noticing requested

Student [008]'s greatest 'noticing' was in the area of vocabulary, grammar, style and conciseness. Actual performance showed the greatest improvement in vocabulary range and accuracy, and grammatical accuracy and fluency. No progress was recorded overall in the area of cohesion.

Student [009] noticed the following aspects week by week (quotation denotes student's actual words):

(Week 1) vocabulary; academic style

(Week 2) organisation; style; grammar (articles); vocabulary

(Week 3) vocabulary; collocation; noun phrases

(Week 4) collocation; grammar (prepositions); passive

(Week 5) vocabulary; collocation

(Week 6) No noticing requested

Student [009]'s greatest 'noticing' was in the area of vocabulary and style. Actual performance showed progress was made in task achievement, whereas no particular progress was evident in other areas.

Student [0010] noticed the following aspects week by week (quotation denotes student's actual words):

(Week 1) passive; academic style

(Week 2) phrases; collocation; vocabulary

(Week 3) vocabulary; collocation

(Week 4) vocabulary; phrases; academic expression

(Week 5) noun phrases; linkers; vocabulary

(Week 6) No noticing requested

Student [0010]'s greatest 'noticing' was in the area of vocabulary, and style. Actual performance showed the biggest improvement in cohesion, followed by vocabulary range and accuracy and then grammatical accuracy and fluency.